

The Big Rock Candy Refuge

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The Big Rock Candy Refuge

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Summary

In Level 2020, Kimmy must carve her way through a candy wasteland infested with zombie gummy bears in search of her missing sister.

Chapter 1: The Storm

My name is Kimmy. Just Kimmy. I had a last name. At least, I think I did. This life is like that, each day blurring into the next. And there have been a lot of days. So many, I barely remember when the whole thing began.

Another flash splits the night. On its heels, a hammer shatters the pouring rain and nearly knocks me off my feet. In the stuttering glare, I think I see movement. It's hard to tell through the beaded curtain of water sheeting off the rock.

A score of heartbeats later, another flash lights the darkness. I swear one of the shadows is not where it was before. I hold my breath, an instinct rendered pointless by the pelting rain.

A third flash reveals the shadow further displaced. I draw another step deeper into my shelter.

I eye the stripe of jam spread across the cave mouth. In the darkness, its outer edge slowly erodes in the water splashing just outside, taking my plans right along with it.

In the next flash, the shadow I saw is gone. The thunderclap comes right on top of it and slams into my body like a honey bear. I stagger back a few steps and sag against the wall to catch my breath.

A moment later, the interior of the cave lights up in a blue-white glare. In an instant, the whole thing spins around me. Something hits my back and shoulder and both ears erupt in a silent pain that quickly recedes, dragging my consciousness away with it.

A cacophony of vaguely familiar scents tickles my nose. Burnt caramel, charred bread, fresh coffee, toasted pumpkin seeds, and a few others that seem to slide off the tip of my brain.

My eyes flutter open. My world has gone sideways and a grey dawn light washes through the cave's mouth, casting every roughness in long shadow. The occasional drips fall twinkling like minute gumdrops.

I move to sit up. A searing pain in my left shoulder and the base of my neck drives me back to the floor with a ragged gasp. I squeeze my eyes shut and hold them there for several long moments.

"No, no," says a male voice. "Don't do that."

I respond with a groan.

"You were lucky," he says quietly.

"Wha?" I manage.

“You were lucky,” he repeats. “Your armor caught the brunt of it.”

“Brunt of what?” I croak.

“Lightning strike,” he says. “Don’t you remember?”

I shake my head and wince at the pain.

“Just that the cave lit up brighter than day,” I say. “Next thing I knew, I was...like this.”

He grunts. “Ya, that’ll do it.”

“Think you can vague that up for me?”

A shadow within shadow moves out of my peripheral vision and squats down not two paces from me. The grey light spilling into the cave illuminates half a face with a fair complexion, a thin moustache, and rumpled auburn hair. He gazes at me for a few moments.

“You were struck by lightning,” he says.

“I...what?”

He repeats it.

“That’s impossible.”

He shrugs. “Not so much, no.”

I glare at him. “How the heck can I get struck by lightning *in...side...a...cave!?*”

He tips his head a little, apparently unfazed by my little outburst. He turns toward the cave mouth and considers it for a moment before quietly saying, “Not afraid of attracting attention, are we?”

I set my jaw, but say nothing.

“There are things out there worse than gummies,” he adds.

I frown. “Like what?” I demand.

He considers that for a moment. “Not sure. I lost it a day ago. But whatever it was, it left an unbroken trail of carnage three weeks long.”

“You were hunting a gummy hunter?”

He turns back to his work, his face lit by the growing daylight and by a dull ruddy glow.

After a few moments, he says, “More like, letting it clear my path.”

“And if you caught up?” I ask before I can stop myself.

I see him cringe even in the paltry light. “I don’t know. I’m still not sure I want to meet whatever it is that can kill so many gummies.”

I manage to heave into a sitting position despite my protesting shoulder. I can see now that he’s kneeling beside a small fire. He moves his hands in the dimness and the ruddy glow flares, followed momentarily by the tang of burnt sugar. “Maybe she didn’t want to meet you, either.”

He looks back at me and lifts an eyebrow. “She?”

I attempt a shrug.

“It was you, wasn’t it?”

I hold his gaze for what feels like too long. “Maybe it was. Maybe it wasn’t.”

He considers this for several long moments. “I see. Your parents taught you not to talk to strangers, is that it?”

I say nothing.

“So,” he continues, “where did a nice girl like you...”

“I’m not a girl,” I interrupt.

His eyes flit from my face to my chest and back. “Apologies, my lady,” he says.

I giggle despite myself and he smiles in return.

“Where did a lovely lady like yourself,” he says, “learn to become so...mind-numbingly terrifying?”

Both my eyebrows rise. “Terrifying? Is that what you think of me?”

“You left a trail of dismembered gummies between here and Waffleton. Anything...or any-*one*...who can do that deserves the utmost respect...and possibly fear.”

“Are you afraid of me?” I ask.

“Should I be?”

“Maybe.”

He looks back toward the cave mouth. “You’re going to need more jam,” the man says. “Where did you learn that, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“A woman picks up a thing or two.”

“More than a thing or two, I’d say. I’ve only ever seen three kinds of people ‘round here.”

“The dumb, the daring, and the desperate,” I say before I can stop myself.

The man chuckles softly. "You're clearly not the first one. And you don't strike me as the daring type. Which begs the question, what ARE you doing so close to the Epicenter?"

I eye him for a few heartbeats. "I have my reasons."

"Mm. Would you have talked to me at the fair?"

"Fair? What fair?"

"I ran the traveling fair before...well, before."

That's when it hits me. "You're Mister Toffee!"

He lets out a heavy sigh. "I was. That was...before."

I can read between the lines well enough, but he goes on.

"Most of us were turned or devoured. What few of us escaped, fled. I still see them, see her, when I close my eyes."

"I'm sorry," I say. My words sound so hollow to my young ears. But what else is there to say? "Kimmy," I add after a moment.

"Kimmy...?" he prods.

"Just Kimmy."

"Pleased to meet you, just Kimmy."

"Same." I pause, and finally decide that if Mr. Toffee was going to do anything to me, he would have done it by now. "I'm looking for my sister," I say.

"And your search brought you here?" His voice cracks slightly.

"Our parents worked for..." I pause when it occurs to me that I didn't know.

Toffee cocks his head. "And?" he prods.

"I don't know."

"That's...unusual. I can't say I've ever met anyone who didn't know where their parents worked."

"Oh, I know *where* they worked. I just don't know what it is, let alone what they did there. They always evaded whenever we asked. At the time, I figured they thought it was too complicated for a pair of little girls to understand."

"And now?"

I hrmph. "Now I think they were working on something secret. No idea what. Could have been...what's that called...ah, yes, industrial espionage. Or the government. I won't know

until I go there.”

“You said you didn’t know where it was.”

“Well...I know roughly. Fine, I know the symbol for it. I don’t know how to describe it, but I’ll know it when I see it.”

“All I can say is that I hope you know what you’re getting into. Or at least that you can get out of it. So,” he continues, “breakfast?”

My stomach gurgles before I can say anything.

“I’ll take that as a yes. But...”

“You only have enough for one?”

“No, I have enough. Barely. But only one pan.” He sets a shallow cast-iron frying pan on the floor in front of me. “Ladies first,” he says.

He pours something from a percolator into a stoneware mug and hands it to me. A familiar aroma wafts into my nose.

“Is that...coffee?” I croak.

“The *other* dark meat!” he says.

Chapter 2: The Cave

“Kimmy, what do you think you’re doing?”

I jump slightly and hope he doesn’t notice. I pry my gaze away from the water cascading across the cave mouth. “I thought you said it was a deep cave,” I say.

“It is,” he says. “But that doesn’t answer the question.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re standing at the cave mouth with all your belongings. Belongings you not-so-surreptitiously had all packed up by the middle of yesterday.”

“But...”

He sighs. “Look, you may be good at killing gummies, but you’re a terrible liar. And terribly lucky.”

“Lucky?”

“I’m saying that you apparently have some skills, but you’re inexperienced enough that you’re going to get yourself killed. Now, if you have any hope of surviving long enough to find your sister, we simply must do something about that arm of yours.”

I glance at my left arm dangling at my side. “You said it would get better.”

“Not without help, it won’t.”

“Every day I spend here is another day...”

“If you go out there with one functioning arm, you’ll be no good to your sister or anyone else. Now, will you accept my help, or not?”

Late morning sunlight slants across the cave’s mouth, illuminating a jagged oval of floor just in front of my toes. I gaze out at the landscape transformed by three whole days of rain. Three days! I still have trouble believing it. Everything I can see hangs limp and soggy. It’s what I can’t see that bothers me.

I flex my still-stiff arm, working it back and forth and around in circles. The motion pulls against the scabs and I think I feel a small bit pull open yet again. The swelling is down even more and I think I have a little more range of motion. Though it’s hard to tell through the leather sleeve Toffee fashioned for me.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asks.

I shoot him a look. “Forty-seven,” I say. At his frown, I add, “That’s how many times you asked. Just today.”

“Did I?” He feigns innocence.

I pretend to ignore him and flex my arm again. At least I can move it now.

I shrug my pack a little more firmly onto my right shoulder. “My sister isn’t going to find herself,” I state with more confidence than I feel.

At that, I step into the dazzling light.

The rocks strewn before me glint in the sunlight as though dusted with sugar. In places, some of their surfaces have already dried. Small ferns wave fronds the size of my palm from between crevices. Off to the right, a ground squirrel pokes its head up, looks at me, twitches its whiskers, and vanishes. I see no sign of gummies. I set off across the boulder field that lays between the cave at my back and the soggy forest.

“Mad,” he says from behind me almost too quietly to hear, “simply mad.”

He’s probably right. Even if half the rumors I’ve heard about Candytown are true, I’m going to have a meat-grinder of a fight on my hands. And if I do, then Mr. Toffee’s right, I’m going to need all the help I can get.

I totter down the fell-field, Toffee a dozen steps behind me. I slip several times, and only the leather around my arm and the gloves on my hands save me from a collection of nasty gashes.

At considerable length, I finally step from the rocks and onto the moss-strewn ground where I’d stood on the eve of the storm. I pause for breath before plunging onward through sparse, ankle-deep herbage.

Above, the drooping, soggy truffula boughs let sunlight flood the forest floor peppered with woodland wildflowers. Thin carpets of pink heart-shaped flowers nod over blue-ish ferny leaves. Here and there, a trio of white petals and their trio of leaves hover above the pink-hearts. Yellow violets and purple anemones huddle between hummocks of coarse ferns with fronds half the length of my arm. Pale pink sorrel pepper the duff about the truffula boles.

“You know,” he says once we reach the deer trail I’d been following, “we’re going to have to do something about that arm.”

“I thought you already did.”

“So did I. But the way you’ve been flailing since leaving the cave?”

“I was fine.”

“No, you weren’t. You took no fewer than six spills, and one of those would have sliced your arm open to the bone if not for the leather. No, you need more help. And I think I know just the place.”

“Why do I have a bad feeling about this?”

“Kimmy, you wound me.”

I snort.

“It’ll be fine. Trust me.”

I sigh to myself. I really do have a bad feeling about this.

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